

Culture Is the Broth: Safety and Retention Begin Within



"If you think of safety as a stew, the culture is the broth in which the solid ingredients simmer. If the broth is rancid, the stew will be spoiled." — Dr. Steven Simon

That quote, shared by Jennifer Pickerel at BASS 2025, says it all. In aerospace, we're proud of our technical standards, compliance ratings, and training protocols. But culture? That's the broth everything simmers in. If the culture is weak, toxic, or neglected—no amount of procedures can save the flavor of your safety stew.

Why the Broth Matters

Every flight department has "ingredients": SOPs, safety manuals, SMS protocols, maintenance records. But the broth—your culture—is what holds it all together.

- A rich, healthy culture brings out the best in your people and elevates safety and retention.
- A rancid or neglected culture poisons everything, even when the ingredients look perfect on the surface.

It's not enough to have the meat and vegetables in place. We need to nourish the broth—our shared values, behaviors, and sense of belonging—if we want the whole system to be safe and sustainable.

Culture Isn't a Bonus—It's the Foundation

In the flight department, we train relentlessly. Annual proficiency checks, safety audits, SMS reviews—these are non-negotiable. But when was the last time we assessed our team culture with that same discipline?

Culture doesn't announce itself—it seeps in. Left unchecked, it undermines everything, including safety.

Safety Culture Doesn't Exist in a Vacuum

Pickerel's presentation reminded us that safety culture is a subculture. It's only as strong as the organizational culture surrounding it. You can have every checklist in place, but if your team doesn't feel respected, trusted, or empowered, risk lives in the silence.

Psychological safety isn't a soft skill. It's a safety-critical condition.

When Culture Breaks, Safety Follows

Jennifer shared a compelling case study: A flight department with IS-BAO Stage III, FOQA, and safety committees. Yet within that 'A-grade' safety system, toxic culture issues brewed:

- Harassment with no recourse
- Techs treated as outsiders
- Pilots silenced by fear of reprisal

These weren't HR concerns—they were operational risk indicators.

Macro and Microcultures: Align or Fracture

Departments naturally evolve their own microcultures. But without intentional alignment, those silos cause disconnects that increase risk. Misalignment doesn't just cause tension—it creates safety gaps.

Leaders Can't Improve What They Don't Measure

We assume silence equals satisfaction—but it often signals disengagement.

Pickarel recommends:

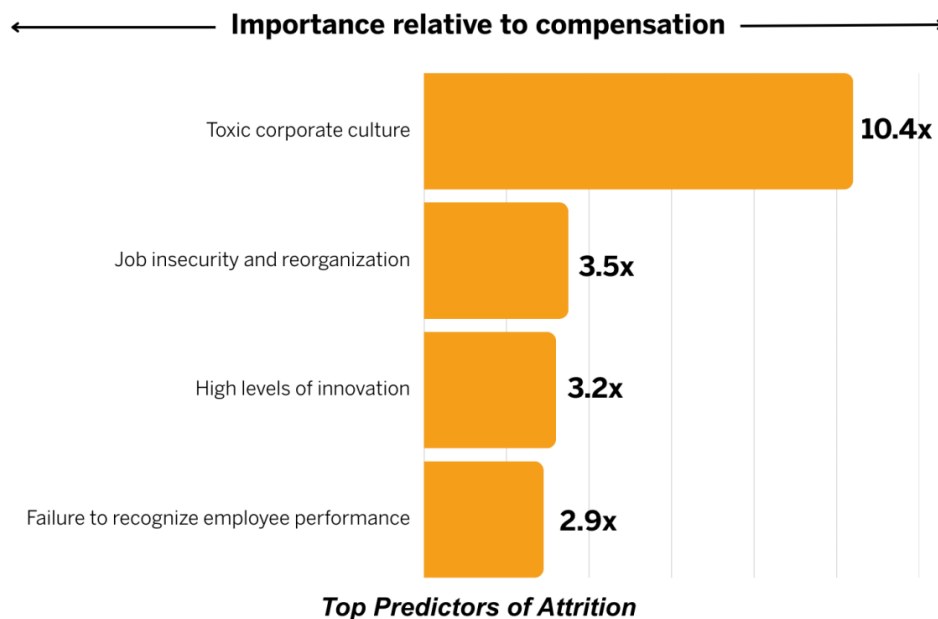
- Conduct regular check-ins and skip-level conversations
- Use anonymous surveys
- Listen to informal leaders
- Bring in third parties for honest evaluation*

We feel so strongly that all WYVERN Members receive a complimentary annual Safety Culture Analysis. It's one of the most powerful tools we offer to help organizations understand where they stand and how to grow. When you know your culture, you can shape it— with intention, not assumption.

The Cost of Avoidance

MIT Sloan reports toxic culture is the #1 driver of attrition—10x more powerful than compensation.

In aerospace, where we invest heavily in onboarding and training, we can't afford culture-based churn.



Research Conducted by MIT Sloan Management Review

Five Steps to Build a Resilient, Retention-Driven Culture

1. Listen Actively – Create space for honest dialogue and ask meaningful questions
 2. Prioritize Recognition – Recognize behind-the-scenes work as much as public wins
 3. Support Holistic Well-Being – Treat wellness as a strategy, not a perk
 4. Measure and Manage Culture – Use data to make culture actionable
 5. Promote Psychological Safety – Model vulnerability and reward openness
-

Key Takeaways from BASS 2025

1. If you don't create the culture, it will create itself
 2. Lead by example—your team is watching
 3. Safety culture is constrained by organizational culture
 4. Strong culture = Higher retention = Safer teams
 5. Get the data—then act on it
-

WYVERN's Role in Cultural Health

WYVERN believes in a holistic approach to safety—one that includes people, processes, and culture. Our Flight Leader Program, Safety Leader Training, and Safety Culture Assessments help:

- Break down silos
 - Strengthen communication
 - Build psychological safety
 - Turn culture into a tool
-

Let's Build a Culture That Retains, Inspires, and Protects

If your culture isn't aligned with your safety goals, your risk is growing silently. WYVERN can help you measure what matters—and act with confidence.

If you are not subscribed to our weekly newsletters, subscribe now at the bottom of this page. For further resources and guidance on implementing Safety Management Systems, contact WYVERN, THE industry expert. Attend our [SMS Training Workshops](#) or ask about our SMS software. [Contact us for a FREE SMS demo!](#) Together, we can elevate aerospace safety and create a safer future.

References

Inspired by Jennifer Pickerel's session and article on workforce culture in business aviation:

Pickerel, J. (2025, April 16). Wake.Up.Aviation*.Culture.is.the.new.currency; Retrieved from [GlobalAir.com: https://www.globalair.com/](https://www.globalair.com/)